

Abandoned not FORGOTTEN



Civita di Bagnoregio emerges from the early morning mist like a mythical landscape in a children's fairytale. **By Josephine McKenna**



THE TINY TOWN is perched on the edge of a cliff on the border of Umbria and Lazio, 120 kilometres north of Rome, and the narrow footbridge that links it to the rest of the world looks like a medieval drawbridge.

Founded by the Etruscans more than 2500 years ago, Civita di Bagnoregio bills itself “the town that’s dying” and it’s one of thousands of “ghost towns” across Italy.

The population has fallen to fewer than ten – even the locals can’t agree on how many are left – landslides, earthquakes, poverty and unemployment have driven people away.

Rossana Medori, 68, and her husband are among the handful of natives who still live in the town today.

“My family goes back centuries, my surname is common in this town,” says Rossana proudly. “My parents, my grandparents, and my great grandparents were all born here. My roots are here.”

Civita di Bagnoregio traces its history back to the Bronze Age but it’s the Etruscans who have left their mark in the cave dwellings and cantinas they excavated from the tuff cliffs that sit above layers of clay.

These days the town is covered in medieval stone buildings that have been rebuilt several times and it only has a

couple of streets. You won’t find any cars, post offices or supermarkets here and the only school shut down more than 50 years ago.

But the picture postcard town has become a magnet for thousands of tourists who swarm into the town on foot every day.

Rossana shakes her head saying, “So many beautiful memories.” She remembers when the local women went to the well for running water or stacked their laundry on a donkey to take it 300 metres down to the water running in the valleys below.

“It was beautiful when I was growing up, the town was alive with people,” Rossana tells *Italianicious*. “I lived in another Civita, but it’s gone. Life was much simpler, we lived well.”

Now Civita di Bagnoregio is filled with holiday apartments, restaurants and souvenir stores, which cater for tourists who flood in from Australia, the US, Europe and Asia to explore this historic treasure.

Groups of Chinese and Japanese tourists are seen scurrying through the streets taking snaps while Italian visitors stop for a long lazy lunch of homemade pasta, wild boar, pork and other specialties.

Arianna Bastoni, Rossana’s 39-year-old daughter, runs La Cantina di



Arianna, the restaurant beneath the family home where she grew up. The restaurant's wines are stored in an Etruscan cantina that was carved out of the cliff.

Although Arianna was forced to move across the valley in neighbouring Bagnoregio where her young daughters attend school, her heart remains in Civita and she often spends the night with her parents.

"When you cross that bridge it's like stepping back in time, every stone tells a story," she says.

"In the morning when there's no-one here you can hear the church bells or a bird singing. When the tourists leave in the evening, the atmosphere is magic."

But for centuries the town has been

dogged by earthquakes and landslides. There is a law from 1373 banning anyone from digging caves in the cliffs or beneath city streets, while disastrous earthquakes in the 17th and 18th centuries drove people away.

In 1944 German troops blew up the bridge that connected Civita to the rest of the town and more landslides followed.

Over the years buildings have collapsed or slid down the side of the steep cliffs as cracks and chasms appeared. Experts now say the landslides are getting worse, threatening the town's very survival.

Giovanni Maria Di Buduo, geologist from the town's Geological and Landslides Museum, says there can be as



Arianna Baston runs a restaurant beneath the house where she grew up.

many as two dozen landslides a year but no-one knows the precise tally.

"It is fundamental to check the area day by day to prevent it from worsening," Giovanni says. "We need a plan for constant monitoring. It is unreasonable to take action only when an event or an incidence occurs."

Giovanni and other geologists are running a campaign to save the town. They say greater scrutiny is essential and also makes economic sense.

"Stabilising a very large landslide has a considerably higher cost than preventative intervention and often the work is technically complicated," Giovanni says.

Two years ago a €1.50 entry fee was introduced for day visitors to finance works to support the town's shaky foundations and many are pushing for a UNESCO World Heritage listing to help protect it.

"We are down to the bone, the prosciutto is gone," says Franco Sala, who owns the Antico Forno Trattoria and a bed and breakfast overlooking the town's main square, Piazza San Donato.

"They should have started earlier to protect it. It's not Civita itself or the main square, it's the surroundings."

As the number of tourists surges, there are greater logistical challenges. The town has no medical services and restaurant supplies are shipped in on tiny vehicles.

Bars and restaurants are stretched to the limit when thousands fill the streets at weekends or for the annual



Tonna, a donkey race that takes place in September. During this year's Easter weekend nearly 20,000 visitors passed through the town.

Franco moved to Civita di Bagnoregio 20 years ago but he says it's almost unrecognisable today.

"In those days there was only one bar. I used to see wild boars and cows in the main square and I'd call the farmer and tell him to come and collect his cows," he says.

Tourism is clearly driving Civita di Bagnoregio's survival but other towns across Italy are not so fortunate. Many are taking more drastic action to save their derelict or dying towns.

In the town of Gangi in central Sicily, the council is giving homes away, Carrega Liguria is offering homes to buyers in the mountains of Piedmont and the town of Lecce nei Marsi in Abruzzo is selling dwellings once owned by shepherds, miners and outlaws for €1.

Gangi's population has fallen from 16,000 to a little over 7000 in recent decades as residents moved away to Germany, Switzerland and Argentina

looking for work and new opportunities. The council is giving houses away in a bid to reinvigorate the town.

"People understand this is good for the economy," says Gangi's mayor, Giuseppe Ferrarello. "I am convinced we are sitting on a gold mine. We only have to exploit what our ancestors left behind."

Under the council deal, buyers are only asked to pay government transfer fees, €5000 in insurance and pledge to refurbish the property within three years.

Located 80 kilometres inland from Palermo, Gangi is surrounded by the rugged Madonie mountain range and offers spectacular views across rolling hills of golden farmland. Sometimes you can see Mount Etna in the distance.

"They thought I was mad because we are so far from the sea and major cities,"



Rossana Medori is one of the few residents that remain in Civita di Bagnoregio.



Giuseppe says. "My vision was to restore the historic centre."

The word has spread and after plenty of local and international media coverage, the council has received more than 2000 requests from as far as Brazil, Japan and Australia to take up its offer.

"We don't want people because they think it's fashionable who then sell up and leave," Giuseppe says. "We only want people who are in love with Gangi."